Karl Marx's Conception of International Relations

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Even though Marx was not widely read during his own time and Marxism, as a political system may be outdated, at least from the present perspective, Karl Marx remains an iconic figure of the 19th century. One of its most influential and controversial philosophers, his thinking has influenced not only the ideology of former and present communist countries, but also the international system as a whole. His theories have had a deep impact on academic studies, and while he did not address the field of international relations directly, much may be derived from his writings on certain phenomena, such as colonialism and nationalism, which are crucial in international relations. The purpose of this paper is to provide a better understanding of Marx's notions of international society. In the following essay, a short overview of Marx's world, concept of man, the state, class and international relations will be given. Finally, the relevance and contributions of Marx's thought to the theory and practice of international relations is analyzed.

Historical Context

Europe, during Marx's life, was a place "of tremendous social, political and economic change". Until Bismark declared on "18th January 1871...the foundation of the German Empire..." Germany was divided into 38 states of different size and power, and was economically underdeveloped. Almost within one generation, Germany overtook Britain, with respect to 'dynamic development'. The Prussian government, the major political and military unit in Germany, in Marx's time, was conservative and opposed to most reforms.²

Marx was born in 1818 in Trier, a Prussian city near the French border. He studied law and philosophy in Bonn and Berlin. According to scholar Richard P. Appelbaum, Marx enjoyed a dismal reputation, during his time as a student. This and his connection with Bruno Bauer, then Marx's "friend and mentor", made it impossible for Marx to find employment as an assistant professor. Throughout his life, Marx never had a steady income or a permanent job and was therefore dependent upon the support of relatives and friends, such as Friedrich Engels, Marx's life-long friend and work-companion. In fact, due to Marx's radical views and his emphasis on the right to free speech, Marx was expelled from France, Belgium and Germany. Finally, in 1849, he went into exile, in London, where he died as a stateless person.³

According to Appelbaum, in his youth, Marx was surrounded by liberal thinkers. For example, his father "was a student of the Enlightenment", and had to convert from Judaism to Christianity in order to continue to practice law. Marx was even christened as a boy. Indeed, early Christianity influenced him with visions of paradise and a strong sense of community. Such influences can be found, for example, in his understanding of a communist society. The teachings of Epicurus also affected Marx's thoughts. He wrote his "doctoral dissertation on 'The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature' [that] reflects his lifelong concern with the conflict between freedom and determinism." Additionally, the German philosophers Hegel and Feuerbach impinged on Marx's notions, from whom Marx took the ideas of the dialectic and materialism and to whom he owes his title, "Modern Father of Dialectical Materialism".

Marx's Concept of Man

According to academic Erich Fromm, Marx's concept of man is based upon Hegel. In order to better understand Marx's view of human nature, it is important to mention that in Hegel's view a

dialectical thinker must distinguish between appearance (earthy) and essence (heavenly). Once man gains self-consciousness, he will discover the absolute truth about himself and his world. Hegel believes that man attempts to put this truth into practice. For Hegel and likewise for Marx, man only makes sense of his life when he is productive.⁵

Man, according to writer Gajo Petrovic, is for Marx, a "being of praxis." He dismisses the traditional concept of human nature that views "man as a rational animal", because Marx does not believe that reason or any form of activity can be the essence of man. Man is a human being because of the form his relationship takes in regard to his environment and himself. This relationship is what Marx calls praxis. Furthermore, consciousness distinguishes human activity from animal activity. Thus, praxis may be defined as "conscious [human] life activity". Nonetheless, to distance Marx's concept of man from the traditional notion, and because man develops and transforms himself in the cause of history, Petrovic suggests defining praxis as "a universal-creative self-creative activity [that] contains its determination as a free, conscious activity".

As man purposefully changes himself and the world he lives in, only man has a history. Therefore, Fromm explains that human nature first needs to be regarded "in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch". In this sense Marx discerns two drives of human nature: man's constant drives, such as hunger and sexual urge, which are essential parts of the individual that do not change, and man's 'relative' drives, which, on the other hand, are based on the respective predominant social structure. For example, in a capitalistic society the demand for money is relative drive; man is calculating and greedy, he is alienated. Thus, man's potential is predetermined by the contemporary prevailing social structure. Fromm further clarifies that "[y]et, man does change in the course of history; he develops himself; he transforms himself, he is the product of history; since he makes his history, he is his own product". Marx writes that although man makes history, the past determines the conditions for this end.

Therefore, Petrovic suggests that, as man has a history and is a 'being of praxis', man also has a future. Marx believes in the ability of man to realize his possibilities and to liberate himself. Here Marx's concept of man differs from Hegel's. Unlike Marx's conception of human nature, which cannot be completed because man changes throughout history, the individual who gains absolute self-knowledge is in Hegel's view, completed and therefore fully definable. For Marx, man is, in the first place, what he can and "ought to be" (essence); therefore, his concept of man is more than a mere conception. Marx, among other things, criticizes man for not seeing his possibilities to emancipate himself from alienation.¹⁰

Marx's concept of man, according to Fromm, can only be completely comprehended by understanding his concept of alienation. Man is alienated when he experiences himself and his environment in a passive way. Marx claims that "the process of alienation is expressed in work and in the division of labor" and that "work is for him the active relatedness of man to nature, the creation of a new world, including the creation of man himself". Because work is no longer included in the nature of the workingman, labor is alienated. As a result, man is not able to "develop freely". The alienated man of a capitalist society is related to his environment only by consumption. Marx pointed out the proletariat as the most estranged and in need to start the emancipatory process, in order to gain freedom from alienation. 12

Marx's Conception of the State

Ralph Miliband writes in his essay Marx and the State that Marx never tried to analyze the state methodically; nevertheless his concept of the state is essential. Particularly in his early writings, including The Class Struggles in France, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts and Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right, his major concern was "the nature of the state and its relation to society". To a

large extent, Marx finally liberated himself from Hegel's notion through his analysis of the Hegelian philosophy of right and the state. Marx then developed his point of view and answers to some of the challenges he had come across. Analysis of Hegel's thoughts appeared repeatedly in his later work.¹⁴

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx described the evolution of the state, beginning with the early epochs of our history, in which society was almost completely structured in different ranks. Ancient Rome, for example, was divided into patricians, knights and slaves. With the need of a work force, due to the development of agriculture, the creation of states, so as to maintain a slave class, became necessary. This marked the metamorphosis of a tribal society, which did not need a state to ensure its existence, to an ancient state system. This gave way to the feudal society, which was a structure determined by subject-kinship relations. The class structure was, therefore, extremely developed. With the expansion of trade, the bourgeoisie developed and edged out all the classes that remained from the Middle Ages. Marx wrote that the structure of the bourgeoisie epoch is simplified. Only two antagonistic classes face each other: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. An anticological ranks of the structure of the bourgeoisie epoch is simplified.

The ideal form of the bourgeois state, according to Marx, is a 'democratic representative state' because of the absence of feudal obligations and enforcements on the state's population. As quoted by Miliband, Marx's view of the state is that of a "great organism in which must be realized juridical, moral and political freedom and where the individual citizen, in obeying the laws of the state only obeys the natural laws of his own reason, of human reason". However, the actual behavior of states, according to Marx, differs from this end. In reality, according to Marx, the ruling class uses the state to put its own interests into practice, to strengthen its own position in the system and to exploit the working class. Marx criticized Bruno Bauer, a prominent Austrian member of the Young Hegelians, for having confounded political emancipation with human emancipation. For Marx, political emancipation is of major importance, but it is not synonymous with human emancipation, as "the state may well free itself from some constraint, without man himself being really freed from it". Human emancipation can only be realized by transforming bourgeois society: the abolishment of private property, an entity that alienates human beings. The state of the state of the property of the state o

Marx and Engels wrote in the Critique of the Gotha Programme that capitalism can be transformed by revolution to communism, and the state, in this period of change, would be headed by the "dictatorship of the proletariat". According to Marx, the workers' state would provide free health care, and its educational institutions would be free of church and state interference.²¹ The task of the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the nationalization of the means of production and the establishment of a true democracy, which in no respect resembles liberal or populist democracy. According to Marx, "Universal suffrage, direct elections, multiparty campaigning, or parliamentary institutions" would only create "unfreedom". Unlike capitalist democracy that excludes women and imposes residential qualifications, a true democracy would be for the majority, representing "a community in which the free development of each provides the basis for the free development of all".²²

By nationalizing the means of production, all class distinctions are abolished and the existence of a state is unnecessary. The succession from this is communist society. Marx, not a prophet, left it up to future revolutionaries to determine how a communist society would function in practice.²³ He believed that the future would be formed by "the dialectics of structure and action", thus, only theory could not foresee the outcome of this process. For this reason, Marx concentrated more on examining events of his own time, for example, the Revolution of 1848.²⁴ McLellan cites Marx in a paragraph written in *The German Ideology*, to illustrate Marx's view of a communist society:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the

afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, sheppard or critic.²⁵

More can only be inferred on Marx's views of the state, from his concepts of alienation, inequality and private property.²⁶

Marx's Concept of International Relations

Marx attached much importance to his concept of class, which is, in his view, the dominant actor in the international system. In this sense, the international system clashes not because of its anarchical structure but because of class conflicts. For Marx, two particular features characterize a class: members of society that share the same relations to the means of production and class-consciousness.²⁷ According to Marx, the "economic conditions" turned the majority of society into a workforce whose "common situation and common interests" are formed by "the domination of capital." He maintained that this workforce "is already a class in relation to capital, but not yet a class for itself." This end, however, is accomplished by a "struggle" in which the workers unite and eventually become "a class for itself". 28 Marx discerned two main classes regarding the placement "of a group in the mode of production." These were the bourgeoisie that owns the means of production and the proletariat, which provides wage-labor and is employed by the bourgeoisie.²⁹ This implies that, in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie, which is basically nationally organized and controls different governmental systems, and a growing international proletariat, are facing one another in hostility.³⁰ Marx denoted the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as modern classes. Since the peasantry lacks class-consciousness and relations amongst themselves, Marx did not regard it as a modern class but as a traditional class. Marx signified the modern classes as final classes, because he viewed capitalism as the last adverse stage before a communist society.³¹

According to scholar Andrew Linklater, Marx wrote in the mid 1840s that capitalism would spread around the world and eventually destroy the divisions that set nation-states apart, thus creating a world capitalist society that would replace the international state-system. Colonialism is, for Marx, historically important because it helps capitalism to establish itself in non-capitalist societies. Therefore, Marx views capitalism, which causes the spread of industrial development throughout the whole world, as a precondition for forming a socialist society. Marx noted that private property plays the key role in the transformation process from a traditional into a capitalist and finally into a communist society. Colonizing traditional societies, according to Marx, advances the conditions for an international socialist revolution because only when private property, which comes along with capitalism, exists in a society can it be abolished, and only with its abolition, can man emancipate himself from his alienated existence. This is why Marx, even though he criticized colonialism, vindicated the very same. In practice, Marx had examined "the effects of colonialism on Indian society", which led him to criticize British imperialism, as it oppressively destroyed the Indian textile industry. On the other hand, Marx believed that "colonial rule is beneficial" for the above, mentioned reasons.

Linklater writes that Marx failed to understand the immense consequences of nationalism. Marx believed that differences between societies would be reduced through capitalism.³⁵ The fact that Marx was an immigrant and therefore lacking in patriotic zeal may explain this misjudgment.³⁶ Erica L. Brenner, in *Marx and Engels on Nationalism and National Identity: A Reappraisal*, suggests examining the "class reductionist" thesis in this regard. This thesis places class in the center of its analysis and blames class struggles for national conflicts. Moreover, Marx believed that the infrastructure (the economic basis of society) and the division of labor would influence the superstructure and the behavior of classes and states, rather than national consciousness. However, Marx had to deal with different types of nationalism: working class patriotism, bourgeois nationalism, romantic nationalism, and separatist and anti-colonial nationalism. In the mid 19th century, the English and the Irish proletariat faced each other as adversaries.³⁷ This contradicted Marx's assumption that nationalism could not flourish in a majority of

proletariat organizations.³⁸ In Marx's view, bourgeois nationalism is hostile "towards the majority within each 'nation' [and] not up on any core set of class neutral 'national' interests".³⁹ Romantic nationalism, which vindicates politics of national identity⁴⁰, according to Marx, may not be better than oppression by a foreign power. Brenner quotes Marx:

If the Russian autocrat were to be replaced by Polish aristocrats, then despotism would merely have taken out naturalization papers ... Though the Polish lord would no longer have a Russian lord over him, the Polish peasant would still have a lord over him — only a lord who was free rather than one who was a slave. This particular political change involves no social change at all.⁴¹

Marx distinguishes separatist and anti-colonial nationalist movements according to whether or not they contribute to the transformation towards communism. Here, Marx also distinguishes historical nations who possess the historical right to exist from "historyless" nations, such as Czechs or Slovenes whom Marx believed to be too small and inherently inefficient to exist on their own. With this in mind, Marx favoured the unification of both Italy and Germany. Politically and economically united, these nations would be stronger and more able to dispose of Tsarist and Habsburg influences. ⁴² Marx also supported Poland's independence. In fact, Marx declared, in 1875, at a meeting of the International Working Men's Association, that the request of the international workers' party for "the creation of an independent Polish nation" was not a contradiction, because, during a time of foreign oppression, the nation aspiring for autonomy would use all its strength towards this end, instead of striving for emancipation of its alienated entity. Therefore, according to Marx, nationalism could serve as an important factor on the road to social emancipation. ⁴³

Marx thought of history as a sequence of epochs that are at a time founded on a mode of production. Through revolution, the next epoch can be attained.⁴⁴ The realization of communism is dependent upon how capitalism develops. The attainment of communism is a dialectical process. The predecessor of communism is capitalism. Capitalism has created desires unable to be satisfied by its own means and consequently would cause its own destruction. 45 Marx distinguished two major types of revolution: the bourgeois democratic revolution and the proletarian or communistic revolution. He concluded from his study of the English, French, and American revolutions that these were all bourgeois revolutions, whose driving force was the middle-class, motivated by the urge for capitalistic expansion.⁴⁶ Marx called this form of revolution, 'political revolution', because it only eliminates the old political system. A social revolution, however, removes not only the old power but emancipates also the proletariat.⁴⁷ The bourgeoisie tries to conclude a revolution as soon as possible, whereas the proletariat's interest is a lasting revolution so as to unite the working classes in all major world states to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and to concentrate eventually the productive forces under proletarian supervision.⁴⁸ As in Marx's concept of man, the previously discussed praxis is also important in his concept of revolution. Revolution, for Marx, has a "character of praxis." His theory of revolution and its realization through praxis requires a passive (objective) element. This objective element is the "material basis" and its influence is "human need." Human needs, however, are not the cause of revolution, but "they make them possible". 49 In sum, the time is ripe for a proletarian revolution when capitalism has created the necessary conditions for the transformation, and when the proletariat is internationally united through class-consciousness.

The issue of peace and war is connected by different concepts of Marx's thought, including historical materialism, class struggle and communism. According to Marx, universal peace can only be realized when states disappear in the international structure. When a large majority of the world's societies participate in global solidarity and joint action, a world socialist society can come into being. In such a communist society, as Engels explained in his Speeches in Elberfeld, "it will not occur to anyone to disturb internal peace", nor would a communist society fight an aggressive war, as they know "that in war it will only lose men and capital", thereby exceeding the gains of possible territorial

occupations. From this it follows that the only war a communist society would fight, is a defensive war.⁵¹ As Marx and Engles worked closely together, it can be assumed that this is also Marx's view. Peace was prevalent in Europe during Marx's childhood and early adulthood. Hence, it can be assumed that Marx, therefore, did not ascribe too much attention to war. Nevertheless, this did not make him a pacifist. However, he did appeal to the proletariat, in 1864, to oppose their governments' diplomatic trickery so as to defend morality and justice on the international level, as the outbreak of war could be destructive for the class of industrial workers. On the other hand, war could be the promoter of revolution. Marx never formulated binding rules that would suggest the reaction to threats of war.⁵² He pointed out that war is related to economics. In this regard, Marx distinguished war in early capitalism from war in modern capitalism. War in early capitalism was a frequent form of interaction between states for colonies and trade competition. Modern or industrial capitalism, according to Marx, was characterized by the drive for peace, as military action could have a disastrous impact on "the stock market." The real cause of war, therefore, is not an economic crisis but a political crisis.⁵³ According to Marx, "wars of national liberation were entitled to the support of socialists" and could therefore be justified.⁵⁴ Frederick Engels described, in his Speeches in Elberfeld, the standing army as "one of the most expensive institutions...by which the nation is deprived of the most vigorous and useful section of the population...".55 Moreover, Marx and Engels suggested the "abolition of regular armies and their replacement, not by middle-class militias on the model of the National Guard in France, but by a more democratic arming of the people.⁵⁶

Evolution and Relevance of Marx's Thought for International Relations Theory

According to F. Parkinson, most imperialist theories of our day are based on or have grown out of Marx's thought and that of his disciples. Classical Marxism, mainly formed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, was greatly influenced by the emergence of capitalism, an economic system based on competition and on the notions of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Ricardo and classical Marxists share three fundamental assumptions: (1) the expansion of capitalism (production and trade) occurs "under the stimulus of a homogeneous world market"57; (2) governments initially realize the interests of the ruling class; and (3) borders are unimportant because of the assumption that competitive trade is not only transboundary but also universal. In the final analysis, "classical political economists" and classical Marxists differ greatly. The latter view "the contradictions in the capitalist system as both innate and irremediable" and emphasize the self-destroying mechanism of capitalism. Their concern is who will gain the definite "control of the world economic system" – the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. 58 Due to the unequal distribution of capital between core and periphery, neo-Marxist thought emerged and followers of this school came to the conclusion that "the economic subsystems", such as Britain and France, dominate "the world economic system", thereby contradicting classical Marxist assumption. Neo-Marxists believe that capitalism can cause severe conflicts, on the international level, and that imperialism is rooted in "insufficient domestic demand", so that "capital [is] compelled to seek outlets abroad" and, if needed, with the use of force. 59 Out of this debate, two groups emerged: the reformist group, with Karl Kautsky and Joseph Schumpeter, and the revolutionists, with Rosa Luxemburg, N.I. Bukharin and V.I. Lenin. Lenin wrote Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism. Published in 1916, this work illustrates his beliefs that imperialism is the unavoidable consequence of capitalism. Lenin also stressed the unequal distribution of capital and the limitation of sources and markets, which would increase economic tensions at the international level.⁶⁰

The next step in the evolution of Marx's notion, according to Parkinson, was development theory. This new approach was made possible when many less developed states became autonomous and "a sustained debate on their place in the international system and the nature of the relationship between developed and undeveloped countries" grew out of this new situation. Current theorists are concerned that less developed countries will remain underprivileged and work to find ways out of this dilemma. The most sophisticated of this approach came from Latin America. The Argentine economist, Raul Prebish, introduced the terms "core" and "periphery". The former is "composed of fully developed industrialized

countries" that are the beneficiaries of the conditions of trade, and the latter contains the less developed countries that can only change their destiny by industrializing. 62

Critical theory "subscribe[s] to the Marxist view that the basic task is not to interpret the world, but rather to change it". This theory is, according to academic Tom Travis, connected with the Frankfurt School, in particular with the notion of Juergen Habermas. According to Travis, its central claim is that history and politics form the foundation of all knowledge. This approach was adopted in the 1980s to challenge neo-realism and neo-liberalism, with regard to international behavior in particular. Most Marxists agree that capitalism is the source of international behavior and that its expansion forces core states to create tremendous military power, in order to suppress the uprisings of peripheral states, which try to liberate themselves from such dominant core countries and the prevailing capitalist system. The fact that many of the "nonstate actors" come from the financial arena shows the predominance of economical factors in international society. Even wars that are fought on behalf of security issues have as their source economical matters, such as oil resources. The Persian Gulf War in 1990/91 is an example of such a war.

According to writer Kenneth W. Thompson, Marx's philosophy is blamed for the cruelty perpetrated by countries whose official state ideology claims to be Marxist. For example, the Soviet Union justified the oppression of political opposition and the persecution of certain groups of the population through Marxist rhetoric of the eventual creation of a true communist state. 65 Gamble points out that it is, however, important to distinguish between Marxism-Leninism, which formed the acknowledged ideology of the former Soviet Union, and Marxism, which is "a distinct theoretical perspective, a particular approach in the social sciences, and an independent critical theory".66 Particularly, Western Marxism criticizes the doctrine and behavioral pattern of the Soviet Union. There are two opposing views of whether Marxism is of relevance in the present international system. The first views Marxism as a dead political practice and ideological doctrine⁶⁷ while the second believes that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxism is now finally free of its false connection to a state and can begin again to objectively examine the strength that determines the worldwide economy and the behavior of states. Indeed, "Marxist analysis...points to the urgent need for new systems of multilevel governance in the global economy to identify, manage and steer" our contemporary problems of capital concentration (North-South partition) and increased interdependence that may lead to a financial crisis with serious consequences for the political and economical system.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Although this essay has sought to give a better understanding of certain terms with regard to international society, it is beyond the scope and extent of this work to capture all of the relevant issues of Marx's thought. Most importantly, however, Marx attached great value to the terms 'freedom' and 'universalism', emphasizing class struggle and the predominance of economic factors in the international system. Nonetheless, he neglected or underestimated the role of the state as well as important political elements of international relations, such as diplomacy, the balance of power, nationalism and war. This has led to profound criticism of Marx's ideas. However, Marx's thought forms the foundation of social theory, whereupon, to a large extent, critical international theory was developed in the 1980s. For most Marxists, marking the total collapse of the capitalistic system as a result of the stock market-crash of 1929 validated Marx's ideas. Ultimately, disregarding its perceptible weaknesses, Marx's thought and Marxism in general, serves, for realist theories – which assume that world politics is mainly determined by the struggle for security and military might – as an important counterbalance.

Notes

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¹⁵ Karl Marx, "Communist Manifesto", in Siegried Landshut, ed, *Die Frueschriften* (Stuttgart: Kroener, 1953) 525-526.

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- 62 Ibid, 115-127.
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- ⁶⁴ Tom Travis, "Usefulness of Four Theories of International Relations in Understanding the Emerging World Order", *International Studies* 31.3 (1994): 256-259.
- 65 Kenneth W. Thompson, Fathers of International Thought: The Legacy of Political Theory (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U. Press, 1994) 126.
- ⁶⁶ Andrew Gamble, "Marxism after Communism: Beyond Realism and Historicism" Review of International Studies 25 (Special Issue) Dec. (1999) 127.
- 67 Ibid, 130.
- 68 Ibid, 127-130, 144.

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